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contents: response to allegation of racial discrimination

by

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INTRODUCTION:

On Wednesday, August 24, 1994 I received a letter from Carrie Gavin, assistant director of Equal Opportunity Programs (EOP) at Florida A&M University (FAMU). That letter, sent via certified mail to my home, was "a formal notification of complaints that were filed with the University under University Rule 6C3-10.125."[1]

According to the letter, "the complaints alleging racial discrimination were forwarded to (the Equal Opportunity Programs office) for formal investigation of charges made by several students in the School of Journalism, Media and Graphic Arts in accordance with 6C3-10.125. The students alleged that the racial discrimination occurred while enrolled in PUR 4001 taught by (me) in the Fall of 1993. The alleged incident occurred during a class discussion on September 20, 1993."

Mrs. Gavin asked me to respond in writing "by Monday, August 29, 1994 to the allegation of racial discrimination, more specifically, whether statements made by (me) during (my) PUR 4001

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[1] See Gavin to Gee, 8/23/94.

class on September 20, 1993 were derogatory, racially demeaning or inappropriate." She explained that "a subsequent meeting will be scheduled to review the complaint and (my) response."

On Friday, August 26, I called the EOP Office to ask for a full week's time to reply to the aforementioned complaints. Mrs. Gavin was unavailable, but Mr. Bill Adams, acting in her absence, kindly granted the requested extension of time.

On Wednesday, August 31, I delivered to the EOP Office a letter asking for more information about the allegations and the current procedure for investigating the complaints.[2]

On Thursday, September 1, I received two letters from Mrs. Gavin. The first, dated August 26, was postmarked August 31 and sent via certified mail to my home; it merely confirmed my August 26 phone call and the extension to 5:00 p.m. on August 31. The second, dated August 31 and delivered to the School of Journalism Dean's Office, gave brief answers to my previous questions and stipulated a new deadline: 5:00 p.m. September 2, 1994. – "due to time constraints."[3]

As I attempt now to comply with today's deadline for a response to the allegations noted in Mrs. Gavin's initial (August 23) letter, I am encouraged by her statement that "No matter what the circumstances, we are concerned only with the facts." The classroom incident precipitating the allegations has been investigated

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[2] See Gee to Gavin, 8/31/94.

[3] See Gavin to Gee, 8/26/94 and 8/31/94 respectively.

before, both by the Dean of the School of Journalism, Media & Graphic Arts and by the Provost/Vice-President of Academic Affairs, but this marks the first investigation of it by the EOP Office. Perhaps now, after almost a full year, the truth will emerge.

COMMENT IN CONTEXT (What Was Said – and Why):

Eighteen students were enrolled in my Public Relations Case Studies course last fall at FAMU. We met once a week, on Monday nights, and 14 students attended on Sept. 20, 1993 for our third class of the fall term. Those students were:

#/ name:	present on 9/20:	
1. ATKINSON, Lisa	y	
2. AUSTIN, Derek	y	
3. CLARK, Changalar	y	
4. COLE, James		N
5. DANIELS, Charie		N
6. DAVIS, Nikki	y	
7. FLANIGAN, Marlon	y	
8. GREGORY, Dwanna	y	
9. GRIFFIN, Tia	y	
10. KENNEDY, Chamane	y	
11. KING, Doran		N
12. McKINNIE, Selena	y	
13. McPHERSON, Dana	y	
14. MILLER, Alvina	y	
15. PORTER, Curtis	y	
16. RUMPH, Tisha	y	
17. TUCKER, Tamara	y	
18. WILLIAMS, Vecelia		N (excused for illness)

I got to class a few minutes early that night, and as I walked into the classroom two students were discussing the lack of "outlets" FAMU PR

students had for their work. A few others were listening to this discussion; they were quiet but appeared to agree with the basic complaint that "broadcast students have WAMF, newspaper students have the FAMUAN, magazine students have 'Journey' (produced as a class project in the magazine sequence), but we don't have anything like that."

I listened to this awhile myself, then felt I should remind them of something they seemed to be forgetting: that PR people need to be versatile and, as students, they could – and should – get valuable experience by volunteering on all of these "outlets." They claimed these opportunities were closed to them because they were in PR instead of in the other sequences. I suggested that was not the case.

The students then began charging that the School "owed" them their own outlet – something just for PR students. I asked what, in particular, they had in mind and the idea of a student-run PR firm came up. I told them that could be done through the FAMU Chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), or, if they wished, apart from that student organization, but that if that's what they wanted, I would help them – and, I ventured, so would Prof. Haskins (the other PR teacher at FAMU). One student – the PRSSA president – started complaining that PR students don't get involved in PRSSA.[4]

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[4] As a former faculty adviser to the National PRSSA Board, I knew of several schools where student-run PR firms had been established by the PRSSA chapters, and, as founding adviser of FAMU's PRSSA Chapter, I have tried in the past to interest

When the students continued to claim that the School owed them an outlet, I told them about some current and former FAMU PR students who, on their own, had gotten lots of good experience for themselves just by *doing it*, and I cited specific examples (e.g., Charles Williams, Betsy Helgager, Veronica Jones, for instance). But the complaining continued, and by now it was about time to formally start class.

I needed a way to get their attention and leave them with something to think about so we could move on. What I said then has been variously reported, but, for the record and to the best of my recollection, what I *actually* said is this:

> *"Now I'm going to say something which may upset some of you, because I'm going to use a term that I, myself, consider offensive. What I'm about to say is not direct at any one of you, or at all of you as a class; it's just something I want you to think about . . .*
>
> *"What I want you to be aware of is that, in this day and age, a person can't sit around waiting for someone to give them something. Anyone who doesn't take advantage of the opportunities that are there, or who doesn't make opportunities for themselves may be guilty of having what some would call a 'nigger mentality' – the sort of thinking that can keep us all on the back of the bus forever."* (emphasis added)

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students in having such an "outlet" here. Our PRSSA Chapter has done some good public service activities over the years, but that "lack of involvement" is nothing new. Prof. Haskins is the Chapter's faculty adviser and has been for the past two years.

That is what I said, but that seems not to have been what was heard then (by *some* of the students) and it's not what others have said I said. But because of what I said (or more accurately, because of how it was reported), we've had this whole public flap over the so-called "Gee Incident."

(One question I keep getting is whether my remarks were, in fact, "premeditated"; that seems to be a problem for some: that I would *think through* what I said before I said it! I guess my statement *was* premeditated in that I chose my words carefully and was not trying to be flippant or casual. Surely much worse would be to use the "n-word" off-handedly, as some sort of "slip-of-the-tongue, as though it is something I say often. It isn't, and I'm bothered by the notion that my remarks might be more acceptable had they not been "premeditated." Too, note that I said " . . . keep *us all* on the back of the bus . . . " I was identifying myself with my students – or trying to!)

THE REACTION:

My remark that night last September marked the genesis of what some obviously want to see as my exodus from FAMU. Two days later, on September 22, 1994, a few students delivered to my division director, Dr. James Hawkins, a letter signed by six of the students in the course – less than half of those present when I made my remark. (A seventh student also signed although she was not enrolled in any of my courses last fall.)

The students' letter said, in part, that I . . .

> *". . . made an unacceptable comment in relation to our concern about the lack of public relations outlets for students on campus. He said that waiting around for someone to give us these outlets created a 'nigger mentality,' one which will keep us sitting on the back of the bus forever."*

The students provided copies of that letter to my dean, to the vice presidents for university relations and academic affairs, to the president, and to another teacher (Prof. Haskins) – but not to me!

(Other students later confided to me their suspicion that the letter of complaint was probably not the work of just the six [or seven] who signed it. As one student put it, "They got help on that. I know them, and none of them can write that well.")

Subsequently, SJMGA Dean Ruggles conducted an investigation of the "incident," and Provost/ Vice President Hogg met with students from the course and, separately, with me. (The latter meeting, on October 19, 1993, was attended also by Dr. Leedell Neyland, a former dean and vice president for academic affairs at FAMU).

The report of his investigation issued by Dean Ruggles included recommendations which were reasonable at the time. He suggested an official letter of reprimand be placed in my file and, because I was then heavily involved in helping our School get re-accredited and "to give us, collectively, time to assess his ability to rebuild his reputation," that my application for tenure be delayed for a year.

Dr. Hogg's written recommendations to Pres. Humphries were much more prohibitive, however, leading to the decision on November 3, 1993, to not renew my employment with FAMU.

In response to my request for the reasons for that decision, Pres. Humphries sent me a five-page letter on November 22, 1993, in which he repeatedly castigated me for using a "racial slur" and claimed I had violated everything from University Rules to the U.S. Constitution.

So, among other things, I was being accused of accusing – even though that was *not at all my intent*!

RATIONALE and REMORSE:

Having taught at FAMU for 17 years, I felt comfortable enough with – and concerned enough about – my students that night that I attempted to communicate with them in language I knew to be familiar to them. And I told them clearly at the time that I was *not "calling names" nor accusing anyone in the room*; rather, I said what I said to try to make a point. Indeed, no less a popular personage than Queen Latifah, star of the top-rated prime-time television show watched by blacks from October 1993 through January 1994, has used (and uses) the phrase herself to mean what I meant by it.[5]

In saying what I said to the students, I was trying to make a point in their own idiom, to

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[5] See "African-Americans' Viewing Habits on the Rise," *TV Guide*, March 26-April 1, 1994, p. 36) and "Droppin' Knowledge: A Rap Roundtable," *Essence*, September 1992, pp. 83-120. (Note that the latter appeared a full year before my use of the term in class.)

motivate, *NOT* demean. Some students understood my point and nodded in agreement. But for others my words had an effect that was not intended; my attempt backfired, and I said I was sorry when I saw how upset they were. Regrettably, they seemed not to hear my immediate apology and, instead, chose to write the letter.

Those students' reaction that night almost a year ago caused me great anguish at the time and every day since. I spoke with one or two on the third floor hallway of Tucker Hall the very next day, again to say I was sorry, and I read an apology to the full class at our next meeting a week after the incident. I expressed regret in meetings with Dean Ruggles, Dr. Hawkins and Drs. Hogg and Neyland, and I made an apology to my colleagues present at a Journalism Division faculty meeting last October. Yet my apologies have not mollified some who have seized on this as an opportunity to ruin my career as a teacher.

I realize that what I said was a mistake. But it was a mistake in judgment, not intention. I've always had (and have shown) concern for my students – for their education, interests and welfare. My evaluations (including students' comments) over my 17 years at FAMU bear this out. I have been (and am) *TRULY* sorry for causing any student any pain because of the words I used in my unfortunate attempt to make an important point. Yet some at (and beyond) FAMU seem to feel my apologies are not genuine and my remorse not sincere. What must I do to placate them? Leave FAMU?

Since the incident last September, my critics have been disturbed also by what they perceive

as my continuing effort to try to justify the words I used in the classroom. But my efforts have been only to try to preserve my *rights* to use language the same as others have. Were my words inappropriate? Yes, I'm sad to say they were. But they were *NOT* spoken in any derogatory or racially demeaning manner. I have never knowingly insulted any student in any way, nor would I ever do that – at FAMU or anywhere.

So I have learned a valuable lesson in all this and it has come at a great cost, the end of which is not yet known. Some have suggested I'm fighting now only to keep my job, but that's not the case either. Of course I don't want to leave Florida A&M University; FAMU is, as I've said publicly, a great place to teach *and* to learn. Would I like to stay at FAMU as a teacher? Absolutely; I feel I still have much to teach and much to learn. My forced departure from FAMU, at this point or later, would deprive me of that opportunity to continue learning what I clearly need to know about African-American history and culture, and it also would diminish, though perhaps only slightly, the University's own reputation as a great place to get a multicultural education.

CONCLUSION:

I am curious that any students are urging the issue at this point; my rapport with students has been good since the incident (as, indeed, it was before), my Spring term evaluations were favorable and I've seen no decrease in enrollments in my classes then or now. For students, it seems, after the incident was over in the course, it was over, and some are perplexed about the whole non-renewal reaction and continuing attention

being given this matter. Students who know me seem genuinely glad to have me back this Fall.

In any case, I want to cooperate fully with this EOP investigation now, trusting this will be an opportunity to settle this matter fairly and finally. I will appreciate a formal meeting to discuss the complaints and allegations, and will provide you with a list of current and former students (and perhaps others) whom you should contact for their perspectives on the matter. Please let me know if there are any other ways in which I can assist your investigation.

Thank you for Your consideration.

/s/ Gerald M. Gee